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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes activities of the 5-year Rural Education Project of the Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory (McREL) and reviews the current state of rural education. Deteriorating agricultural economy and mandated school reforms were found to have exacerbated rural school problems of maintaining quality programs in situations of declining enrollment and rising costs. The Rural Education Project sought to identify unique characteristics of small rural schools and to develop the capacity of the rural education community to address issues of rural education cooperatively. The Project established clusters of rural schools linked with institutions of higher education and state education agencies to improve local schools and to create a network of agencies involved in rural educational development. Clusters provided staff and curriculum development, cooperative planning for resource sharing, instructional uses of microcomputers, and rural school involvement in economic development; in addition, participants discussed regional issues, and participated in research studies to provide information about rural education. The Project implemented and evaluated criteria for effective schools as outlined by another McREL project. The report lists useful elements of rural school improvement programs, guidelines for establishing clusters, examples of cluster activities, and nine characteristics of effective schools with corresponding results observed in two rural schools. (LFL)

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THE McREL RURAL EDUCATION PROJECT:
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The Mid-continent Regional Educational Laboratory, as a part of the national network of educational laboratories and research centers, has as its general mission the translation of research findings into improved educational practice. More specifically, as a Rural Education Project, we have worked to bring to rural educators in the region the information and practice growing out of research that appears to be of value. We have also tried to play a support role encouraging the research community to pay more attention to rural education so that they can be more useful to practitioners in the field.

The Lab is currently winding up a five year contract. This paper is an attempt to review what has happened to rural education generally in the region; the activities of the Rural Education Project; its accomplishments during this period of time; and lessons learned from this experience.

Rural Education in the Upper-Midwest, 1985

In the Year One Report to NIE on the Rural Education Project, "Mapping The Terrain/Getting the Pot Boiling/Identifying the Issues/An Emerging McREL Strategy" we identified the most critical problem of rural education to be "the maintaining of quality programs in a time of declining enrollments and rising costs." Two sets of events have taken place during the five years to make these problems even more severe. First, the agricultural economy has deteriorated drastically exacerbating the budget problems across the region. It is predicted that we are just seeing the beginnings in the default of tax payments for the support of public schools. Family farms going into bankruptcy, small business closures, bank failures are becoming more and more frequent. As families are forced to leave the farm, school enrollments continue to decline. With few exceptions, rural schools are getting smaller.

Even the optimism in the energy development areas of North Dakota and Wyoming, reported five years ago, has disappeared with the demise of the energy boom. On the "input" side, both students and financial resources are less plentiful than they were when the Rural Education Project began.

On the "output" side, major changes have transpired as well. An unprecedented number of national reports have been conducted during this reporting period, raising serious questions about the quality of education. The reports have been followed by a wave of school reform legislation seeking to improve the quality of education through various mandates including the addition of courses, e.g. foreign language, higher level math and science. Rural schools, often already hard pressed to meet accreditation standards, are being required to do more.

The above developments have affected all schools in the region to be sure. The impact on rural schools has obviously been more dramatic, the solutions more difficult to come by.

The advent of a Rural Education Project five years ago could not have been more propitious. In the beginning, rural education as a focus of concern was just not present. With the exception of Kansas State University and the involvement of a few faculty members from the University of North Dakota, rural education was not a concern of higher education. State education agencies tended to tolerate small rural schools, imposing "one-best-system" regulations as best they could; continuing to work away at consolidating the smallest systems as opportunities availed themselves. The contrast between this benign neglect and the conversation during a recent board meeting of McREL, where 6 of the 7 chief state school officers were present, is dramatic. Rural education was the major topic of concern. And while there continues to be both the need and the desire for additional school consolidation as a vehicle for improving

rural schools, this was only one of a variety of strategies discussed. There was clearly an interest in and the realization that other options were necessary such as alternative delivery systems involving cooperative programs and the use of technology.

While McREL cannot take credit for all that has happened in bringing rural education center stage, the fact that it was working across the region on rural education problems has certainly helped to focus and bring some coherence to rural school improvement activities.

The Rural Education Project: Its Origins and Strategy

The Rural Education Project had its origins in a national study of efforts to improve rural education funded by the National Institute of Education and conducted under the auspices of the Education Commission of the States. ("Rural Education: In Search of a Better Way", Nachtigal, et.al., Westview Press, 1982.) The study, which looked in-depth at 13 different approaches to improving rural schools in virtually all regions of the country, resulted in a number of conclusions which formed the framework of the McREL strategy.

The first conclusion was that small rural schools are different from large schools in a number of significant ways. Most of the efforts to improve rural schools, at the time of the study, had been designed to address problems in large urban schools. Consistent with public policy based on the "one-best-system" notion, if the solutions made sense for large schools, the solutions would suit small schools as well. Our study found, however, that there was a problem of "fit" when these urban strategies were implemented in rural communities. A problem of fit in terms of the issue being addressed and a problem of fit in the kinds of solutions which were being implemented.

A related and second lesson from the study was that there did not exist at that time a developmental capacity in the rural education community which

could address the specific issues of rural education. No wonder "urban solutions" were being handed down to rural schools. First, public policy did not recognized that rural schools were any thing different than smaller versions of large schools. Secondly, there was no one in the research and development community concerned about and working on the unique problems of small rural schools. (Whereas, not that much has changed in the public policy arena, significant changes have occurred in the interest of institutions of higher education in the problems of rural schools as will be reported later.)

More specifically, the study suggested that rural school improvement programs were found to be useful -

1. Where the problems being addressed had been identified and were important to the local constituents.
2. Where the solutions, while often adapting ideas from the "outside" had a definite flavor of being "homegrown."
3. When technical assistance was available and where local leadership had a major role in deciding when and what kind of assistance was needed.
4. Where rural schools were working together cooperatively. A single rural school had real difficulty in "going it alone" in undertaking major school improvement. Banding together provided the moral support, the economies of scale to make good use of outside resources, and tended to reduce the isolation which hinders effective school improvement.

Based on this research, the Lab has pursued a strategy of working with clusters of rural schools linked with institutions of higher education, and state education agencies. The general guide lines for the cluster strategy are as follows:

1. Interested schools are identified that lie within reasonable driving distance of each other and approximately the same size. Close proximity

allows for cooperative action without undue travel expenses. Districts of approximately the same size are more likely to be experiencing common problems and therefore more likely to be able to work around and benefit from a common agenda.

2. Linkages with a neighboring institution of higher education are established for two reasons. First, there are resources in higher educational institutions which can be used to address the needs of rural schools. Secondly, institutions of higher education have much to learn about small rural schools. By better understanding the nature of small schools, teacher preparation and staff development efforts are more likely to be in tune with the needs of rural education.

3. Clusters work in close cooperation with state education agencies. As with higher education, valuable resources are available for technical assistance to rural schools. Also, as rural schools seek new ways to improve the quality of their programs, questions of rules and regulations continue to emerge. Having the state agency working along with the schools will help remove or work around these perceived roadblocks.

4. The agenda, the activities undertaken by the clusters, must be determined by the participating schools, not the institution of higher education or the state education agency. This assures the necessary ownership to make the activities worthwhile.

5. Commitment to the cluster notion must be long term. Time is needed to establish the trust to undertake significant school improvement activities. Three to five years appears to be the minimum time commitment.

Once these conditions were in place, McREL's Rural Education Project provided access to information and financial support ranging from $2000 to $4500 per cluster for consultants and travel.

Impact of the Rural Education Project

Using the above conceptual framework, the Rural Education Project staff worked to establish a series of rural clusters across the region for the purpose of (1) supporting local school districts in conducting activities which would address problems related to rural school improvement and (2) creating a network of agencies which could serve a rural development function in the region. Both purposes have been achieved. Ten clusters are operating in the region involving all states except Wyoming. (The extent of consolidation and the long distances between schools severely limits the viability of the strategy in this state.) The clusters involve, along with the state education agencies, 7 institutions of higher education, and 66 school districts serving over 27,000 students.

The focus of the work of these clusters includes

- staff development,
- curriculum development,
- in-service for administrators,
- cooperative planning for sharing programs and resources,
- instructional uses of the micro-computer,
- involving the rural school in economic development.

In Missouri, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education joined as a full partner in one of the micro-computer clusters, providing in-service education for their staff and the development of a micro-computer data collection system for annual report information. The system is being piloted this year with 10 districts. Next year, it will be available to all interested districts. Nebraska reform legislation, LB994, encourages and if not done voluntarily, can require cooperative delivery of educational services among educational agencies. The North Dakota cluster, involving a 2 county area, is serving as a pilot for the establishment of other cooperative

activities in the state. A major product resulting from this effort is the deliverable, "Clustering for Rural School Improvement, Handbook for Rural Educators", which includes a more comprehensive description of the strategy and summaries of a number of rural school clusters.

Networking and Related Activities

The clusters form the basis of a rural education network which has meet annually to explore and discuss issues of regional concern. One such session focused on public policy and rural education; another, electronic alternative delivery systems. Consistent with the make-up of the clusters, these sessions include representatives from local districts, institutions of higher education and state education agencies.

Another important function served by the regional network is the carrying out of studies by participating members which contribute to the knowledge base about rural education. A study by staff of the University of South Dakota examined rural school administrators perceptions about public policy impacting their schools. The University of North Dakota, Center for Teaching and Learning, conducted a series of in-depth case studies of small schools. The summary report "Rural Education, Heartland of North Dakota" constituted a special issue of the North Dakota Education Association Journal. Kansas State University carried out a pilot follow-up study of rural school graduates which will serve as the basis of a multi-state, more complete study in FY 86. Milan Wall of Wall & Associates, Lincoln, Nebraska, was commissioned to do a study, and a year later "up-date", entitled "Information Technologies: Alternative Delivery Systems for Rural Schools.

Lessons Learned About Rural Schools and Rural School Improvement

During the past five years, a companion program in McREL has sifted and sorted through the literature which makes up the "effective schools" research

and arrived at "Nine Propositions" which define an effective school. The propositions form the basis for the "Effective Schools Program". During this same period of time, the Rural Education Project as a part of its cluster strategy, was involved in a parallel effort to implement the "effective schools practices" in two small rural elementary schools which operate on the four-day school week. This project, which was one of four funded nationally by the National Institute of Education, had two objectives. First, we were interested in seeing how well the effective schools strategies "fit" the small rural school situation, and, if the strategies were successfully implemented, what difference would they make in terms of student achievement. (Much of the earlier "effective schools" research was conducted in a larger urban context.) Secondly, since we would be collecting data on student engagement rates and student achievement, we wanted to answer some questions about the viability of the four-day week, with its' 20% longer day, for students at the elementary grade level.

Using the "Nine Propositions" as an organizer, a number observations can be made from this four year effort as it applies to rural school improvement.

Proposition 1: There is a level at which resources must exist to provide a base for an effective school.

This Proposition is concerned primarily about physical facilities. The effective schools research suggests that it is not the age or design of a building that is important to student learning, but whether it is well maintained and cared for. The condition of the physical facilities sends a strong message to the students and teachers about whether or not anyone really cares about what goes on in that building. The rural schools in our study, and generally speaking, schools in this part of the country, are viewed with pride. The school is still the center of community activities. The buildings may be old, but they are generally neat and clean.

Proposition 2: Physical safety and psychological security must exist in an effective school.

This is one area where there is a significant difference between the inner-city schools of a Detroit or Paterson and the rural schools of the region. Physical and for the most part psychological security tends simply not to be an issue. It is a given that the school is a safe place for both teachers and students. The climate in rural schools has been described in a number of studies as that of an extended family.

Proposition 3: Student achievement will be greatest when the system is consistent in its purposes, expectations, methods and evaluations.

At the more global level, rural schools do well on this one. The tight linkages which exist between the school and community guarantee a common core of values and expectations. Administrators and teachers are hired who hold values that are consistent with those of the community. "He was hired because he was country." is a phrase used by Alan Peshkin to describe this congruence of values and life styles which typifies rural education.

At the more specific, operational level, rural schools may not do as well. A written curriculum, K-12, often does not exist or is not used. With staff turnover, the curriculum may change drastically from one year to the next. There is not the coherent content focus across across the curriculum which research suggests is necessary for an effective school.

Proposition 4: Student achievement will increase when additional time is available for the student(s) to master the prescribed knowledge and skills.

The "time-on-task" issue takes on some quite different dimensions in rural sites. The high absenteeism, chronic discipline problems which tend to cut deeply into students engagement with learning in urban areas tends not to be present in rural schools. However, losing large chunks of time to

extra-curricular activities does tend to be a problem in small schools. The four-day week, which allowed for moving most of the extra-curricular activities to Friday, when school was not in session, eliminated this problem in our project schools. Baseline data collected at the beginning of the four-year research project indicated average engagement rates of 81.03% in reading and 82.53% in math across the two schools, considerably higher than similar statistics from the urban sites in the Project.

Proposition 5: Increased student engagement will increase achievement.

As indicated above, the engagement rates were quite high to begin with in the two project schools. Third year data (final data has not yet been analyzed) indicates average engagement rates of 90.30% in reading and 91.03% in math, increases that are considered by the researchers to be statistically significant. However, achievement scores while improved, did not show the same degree of change. This suggests that if engagement rates are already fairly high, investing time and energy into pushing them even higher may not be the best use of scarce school improvement resources.

Proposition 6: High student success at daily tasks will occur when student engagement is accompanied by effective instructional practice.

Effective instructional practices, as used here, include, but are not limited to high expectations, clearly stated objectives, daily review of previously learned material, continuous monitoring of student progress, providing internal and external rewards. While all of these notions are quite straight forward and apparently appropriate for schools of any size, a few comments are in order concerning the issue of "high expectations". There is considerable evidence that if teachers hold high expectations for students they are likely to live up to those expectations. If a teacher feels that the student is going to have trouble learning he probably will. Because of the intimate knowledge of students and their families, there is

the temptation to "write off" a younger sibling if the older brother or sister was a trouble maker or a slow student.

A recent study of small high schools, done by the University of North Dakota, also raises some interesting questions about expectations at two levels. It suggests that rural communities may not have high enough expectations for its' school system as a whole. Using their own experience as the only basis for judgment, community leadership perceives their schools to be so much better than what they had, that they must be good enough. What is not recognized is that other schools offer so much more that their students may not be able to compete in the larger arena.

A related issue is that student expectations for themselves are often very limited. Lack of a broad variety of role models, limited course offerings or perhaps just not knowing what different careers are about, result in rural students not aspiring to the higher skilled, professional jobs in a way comparable to that of their larger school counterparts.

Proposition 7: Student achievement is highest in organizational settings that provide a maximum opportunity for individual student growth.

Tutoring and team learning are strategies which research suggests are very effective approaches to instruction. Older students helping younger students was once common practice in one-roomed and multi-graded structures. Such strategies are seldom in evidence, even in the small classes which characterize rural schools. On the positive side, rural schools are less guilty of rigid ability grouping schemes which have been demonstrated to have a negative impact on achievement.

Proposition 8: Improvement occurs when the values or culture of the organization reflect the belief that everyone can improve and that improvement is expected.

This proposition and the following-

Proposition 9: Improvement will occur when the school organization is managed to encourage and support personal and organizational development.

relate to the overall capability of an institution to renew itself. As stated at the outset of the paper, rural education has traditionally not enjoyed this developmental capacity. Because of the multiple demands of rural school leadership, orchestrating an ongoing school improvement effort is just not in the cards. It was, in part, this understanding which underlies the rationale for the cluster approach to rural school improvement.

There are two central issues relating to the quality of rural education that do not get addressed directly in the above Propositions. The first is the preparation and quality of the teaching staff in rural schools; the second is the nature of the curriculum. First, a couple of comments about the teaching staff. The North Dakota small high school case studies suggest that rural teachers tend to have grown up in small towns, attended nearby state colleges for their training and then return to the small town for a teaching career. Relatively few have advanced degrees. Our own field work in the state of Nebraska tends to confirm these findings. In one rather typical small school, over half of the teaching staff graduated from the neighboring state college. For a third of the teachers, this was the only teaching position ever held. This background provides a good match between community expectations for the school and what the school actually provides. The other side of the issue, however, is whether or not students are getting a broad enough exposure to ideas and experiences to adequately prepare them to move into different community settings, if they so desire.

Although good comparative data is not available, the rural school curriculum appears to be much more textbook driven than that of its larger

school counterparts. The reality of the rural teaching load, 4, 5, or even 6 preparations a day, leaves room for little else. Courses such as the lab sciences and written composition appear to suffer the most. It is not unusual for one teacher to be responsible for all the science or all the language arts in the entire school. Under such circumstances, being creative about the curriculum is probably too much to expect. Furthermore, it is not unusual to find rural schools without a set of curriculum guides to provide an articulated focus across grade levels. Each teacher is free to interpret the curriculum as he or she sees fit. If the teacher changes, particularly at the secondary level, the curriculum could change significantly from one year to the next.

In spite of, or even because of, the dire financial picture and the declining enrollments, the climate for working at rural school improvement has perhaps never been better. It is becoming increasingly clear that "business as usual" will not do the job. The fear that "if we cooperate with our neighbors, we will be forced into consolidating" is changing to "if we do not begin working together, we will not be able to survive." Higher education is also beginning to realize that it may have a mission with the public schools which goes beyond the training of teachers. The cluster strategy of school improvement is a most appropriate vehicle to capitalized on this changing climate. One senses that the demand for creating collaborative arrangements far outreaches the Laboratory's capability to support such a strategy. Other agencies will need to acquire the skills to facilitate these programs.

What We Don't Know About Rural Education

What to do about small rural schools is sure to be a topic of growing concern in legislative halls and state education agencies across the region. The consideration of another round of consolidation is sure to be part of that discussion in some states.

Past debates about how to improve rural schools have been based to a large extent on politics and emotion. Perhaps, for good reason. Historically, legislatures have been rural dominated and thus rural interests could be protected. This, for the most part, is no longer the case. Furthermore, there has not been a sufficient data base to argue rationally the pros and cons of small rural schools. Unfortunately, this is still the case.

For instance, just how well prepared are the graduates of rural high schools? Success stories can be related about last years graduates. But, what really happens to rural students over time?

It is clear that a rural school, is not a rural school, is not a rural school. Some rural schools do a very good job, others are a real disaster. This performance difference is related to a large extent to community support and expectations. Information is needed to understand what makes the difference and how to intervene when schools are not up to par.

When does a rural school get too small to do an adequate job? There is really no good data on this issue and perceptions vary considerably from one state to the next. Illinois has concluded, (using questionable data,) that students have the highest academic achievement when they attend schools of between 500 and 1200 students. In South Dakota, a high school is too small from the perspective of the state education agency when it drops to 25 students. James Gutherie, in summarizing the research on school size a number of years ago, concludes that only the most gifted and the severely handicapped really suffer in a small school setting. He does not define what constitutes a small school. He further argues that true economies of scale have not been adequately documented and notes the decline in community participation as districts have become larger and school board members represent greater numbers of constituents.

What really is the quality of the rural teaching staff, how does it

compare to urban and suburban schools. We know they are lower paid and have many more preparations. In Colorado the average teacher's salary ranges from $12,000 a year to $31,000 in Colorado. Does this make a difference in teacher commitment and effectiveness?

What are the true drop-out rates in rural schools? Are they better or worse than in the cities? One would expect them to be better, but good data is just not available across the region. In the Kansas State University pilot follow-up study mentioned earlier, class rankings in the graduating classes for the past 4 years, of all six schools showed a ratio of better than 75% girls and less than 25% boys in the top quarter. The bottom quarter was almost reversed, with by far the majority being boys. The effective schools research would suggest that this is a real problem. In an effective school, class distribution should not reflect minority, socio/economic or sex difference.

The closer one looks at rural education the more obvious is the fact that there exist little usable data to really know what we think we know about rural schools. Rural education desperately needs an organized body of information to provide some good answers if it is to fair well in this latest round of public scrutiny.

In the study of rural school improvement mentioned earlier, a typology of rural schools was suggested which could provide the start of a framework for such a body of information. Three types of rural communities, were identified, e.g. the "rural poor" of the hispanic barrios, the minority Southeast, the Indian reservations; the typical "middle American", communities which used to be well off, but are not any more; and the "communities in transition", the oil boom towns, the ski resorts... Others could be added, and if combined with some size breakdowns, e.g. schools with less that 100 in high school, 101 to 300, 301 to 500 .... one would be able to collect and analyze information in a

way that would be more useful for policy decisions.

In Summary

While the nature of rural education problems has not changed significantly during the past five years, the intensity of those problems has increased. Through the work of the Lab and cooperating agencies, there exists a growing capacity within the region to address those problems.

While it is clear that rural schools face problems of tighter budgets, declining enrollments and meeting increasing standards, just how good an education students receive or what disadvantages they experience as a result of attending a small rural school are not well understood. There is some evidence that on a number of dimensions of the "effective schools" criteria, rural schools do quite well.